

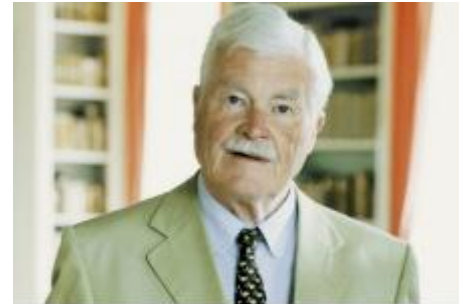
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The following article is from our **October 2005** issue.

Guilty by Omission. A private bank documents its conduct toward Jews during the Third Reich. By Brigitte Sträter

Banks, too, profited from the expropriation of Jewish property during the Nazi era. Facing this history isn't easy. Without attempting to make excuses, a small private bank has researched its past.

The envelope said: "Moved to Lubin, forwarding address unknown. June 24, 1942." The recipient could no longer be located and the mailman returned the undeliverable letter. The addressees, the brothers Alfred and Fritz Feldhahn, had been deported to Poland and murdered there in a death camp. They had been customers of the Fürstlich Castell'sche Bank und Credit-Casse in Würzburg.



fürstlich castell'sches archiv

For a long time, German banks kept silent about their past and that of their Jewish customers. Only at the end of the 1980s did Deutsche Bank, Dresdner Bank and Commerzbank create teams of researchers to look into the matter. Cases were looming from American courts regarding the expropriation ("Aryanization") of Jewish assets during the Third Reich. Compensation claims went into the billions of dollars.

With minimal outside support, the historian Count Jesko of Dohna, director of the Fürstlich Castell'sche archives, spent many years investigating and then presented the documentation that dealt with the fate of "small" Jewish bank customers and the "Aryanization" of their accounts, their commercial transactions and their real estate. All other German private banks, with the exception of the Cologne bank Sal. Oppenheim, have to date abstained from doing so.

The initiator of the project was Prince Albrecht of Castell-Castell, board chairman of the Castell'sche Bank. In a very frank and personal way, he describes in the book's foreword how the book came to be. He grew up in a family marked by German conservatism and nationalism, for which honor, loyalty, duty and the respect for rules were a priority. In the so-called "Jungvolk," the Nazi organization for children, the young count marched as a drummer through his home village and enthusiastically took part in the scouting games and assemblies of the Hitler Youth.

When his father was made a reserve officer in 1939, his two sons hoped that the war would not end without their participation. Their wish was fulfilled, but only the 19-year-old younger brother returned safely in the summer of 1945. Albrecht's brother and father had fallen.

Nearly 50 years later, Prince Albrecht visited Auschwitz. He was already 69 years old. He wrote that what had happened there also had something to do with him. He asked himself what his parents would have thought of the burning synagogues, destroyed Jewish apartments, plundered businesses and the arrest and deportation of Jews. And it became quite clear to him for the first time: his parents had shown no signs of sympathy, no shock, not even indignation. "We made ourselves guilty through unkindness, indifference and omission," he wrote.

Prince Albrecht began to search out contact with surviving Jews and to offer his help. Remembering, realization and repentance came at the beginning. He was thankful for the experience of forgiveness. Interest, devotion and love grew out of it, as well as the desire to research and make public the fate of Jewish bank customers and their interactions with the Castell'sche Bank.

The names of 163 Jewish customers of the bank are listed on 11 pages, in nearly every case with name, birth date and birthplace – and with their fate: deported, murdered, lost, emigrated. Died within the Third Reich or later. Only a few survived in Germany.

The banks played a significant role in the persecution of Jews and the confiscation of their fortunes. In order to give their criminal actions the appearance of constitutional legality, the national socialist regime issued a sophisticated set of rules and regulations, which substantially encroached on the business operations of money institutions, thereby usually making them compliant and an extended arm of the administration.

Already in 1935, the Nuremberg Laws denied Jews all civic rights. In the beginning "voluntary" sales of Jewish businesses prevailed under the pressure of the political situation.

After the "Reichskristallnacht" pogrom of 1938, "de-Jewifying the German economy" took place. These purges not only affected the large Jewish business and trading houses, but in equal measure the retail operators, small traders and the self-employed; in effect, the typical clientele of the Castell'sche Bank.

Belonging to this group was Fritz Feldhahn, who had inherited a house from his mother that had a mortgage with the bank. When he could only pay the interest sporadically because of dramatically declining business, his brother Alfred took on the responsibility for a number of years. When things also took a turn for the worse for him, the Castell'sche Bank received the terse notice that Alfred "Israel" Feldhahn (what he had to call himself due to his "Arvan" first name) had been "evacuated." His address was unknown and all

of his assets were left to the German Reich.

An inquiry into the whereabouts of his brother Fritz came back with the notation: "Moved to Lubin, forwarding address unknown. June 24, 1942." In the meantime his house also belonged to the German Reich.

In this manner, the book documents the fates of numerous Jews from the Franconian area of Germany. At the end, the author comes to the following conclusion: the Castell'sche Bank adapted itself to the new political and economic system, adhered to legally ordered measures in terms of its Jewish clientele, "showed however in some cases little empathy for their hard-pressed situation... But in no way could an aggressive 'Aryanization' program or excessive personal greed be seen on the part of the owners or management. As with other bankers, a friendly attitude toward persecuted Jews was not to be expected from business."

- Brigitte Sträter is a freelance journalist in Düsseldorf.

Reihe XIII Band 45

ISBN 978-3-86652-045-5 (3-7686-9309-0) Dohna, Jesko Graf zu: Die »Jüdischen Konten« der Fürstlich Castell'schen Credit-Casse und des Bankhauses Karl Meyer KG.

2. Auflage 2006. 144 S., zahlr., z.T. farb. Abb. - 22,5 x 14,7 cm

VK **16,00 €**

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Wissenschaftlicher Kommissionsverlag

Internet:

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